

MESSIANISM IN THE MID-11TH/17TH
CENTURY AS EXEMPLIFIED BY
AL-BARZANJĪ (1040–1103/1630–1691)

David Cook
Rice University

I. Introduction: Muslim apocalyptic and messianic beliefs

The study of Muslim apocalyptic is an exciting and rewarding field, which has come into its own.¹ Many of the studies published thus far, however, cover the material from the point of view of the traditions themselves, and do not explore the reasons for their collection or the reasons behind the writing of apocalyptic books. While for the most part the original background of Muslim apocalyptic is opaque to us, ascribed as it is in its entirety to the Prophet Muḥammad or to his close companions, work remains to be done on the reasons why later compilers continued to use this material. There have been numerous apocalyptic moments in the history of Islam which have led to the material being constantly reused and occasionally reinterpreted. Unfortunately, few studies have been devoted to covering later Muslim apocalyptic moments.² This paper will examine a comparatively late apocalyptic writer, al-Barzanjī (d. 1103/1691), and the apocalyptic atmosphere surrounding the publication of his *al-Ishāʿa li-ashrāt al-sāʿa* (on 11 Dhū al-Qaʿda 1076/April 20, 1666).

Muslim apocalyptic writers tend to be compilers rather than composers, which means that their primary concern is to relate accurately the materials handed down to them. If this material, usually found in the form of *ḥadīth*, is anachronistic, there is little attempt to explain it.

¹See my *Studies in Muslim apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin, 2002) for a full bibliography.

²See, e.g., Armand Abel, “Une *ḥadīth* sur la prise du Rome,” *Arabica* 5 (1958): 1–14; Josef van Ess, *Chiliasmische Erwartungen und die Versuchung der Göttlichkeit* (Heidelberg, 1977); Richard Hartmann, *Eine islamische Apokalypse der Kreuzzugzeit: ein Beitrag zur ḡafr-Literatur* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1924); and Remke Kruk, “History and apocalypse: Ibn al-Nafīs’ justification of Mamlūk rule,” *Der Islam* 72 (1995): 324–37.

In general, even traditions relevant to the time of compilation receive little comment. This tendency is apparent in all but a few writings of Muslim apocalyptists.

In general, Muslim apocalyptists also fought an uphill battle to gain acceptance for their material. With the passage of time, much of their best and most descriptive material has been relegated to the category of forged traditions (*mawḍūʿāt*). This is particularly true of traditions concerning the Mahdī, the Muslim messianic figure, which are politically explosive. Other categories of apocalyptic traditions, such as those concerning the Antichrist (*al-Dajjāl*) and the Signs of the Hour (*ashrāt al-sāʿa*) were apparently accepted wholesale into the canonical literature.

When one reads the whole, taking the entire apocalyptic heritage as a unit, it has coherence to it. However, as the canonical traditionists such as al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875) present it—using their criteria of the transmitters' reliability to judge a tradition's authenticity—it is disjointed and inconsistent. This disjointedness is due to the fact that the canonical *ḥadīth* collectors only accepted a small part of the entire apocalyptic tradition. Therefore, Muslim apocalyptists stand just slightly outside of canonical respectability, because their material will not stand up to the rigorous standards of the *ḥadīth* canon.

Many Muslim writers have written apocalyptic books or collections of apocalyptic literature. These writers usually try to hide behind the respectability of the canonical writings and pretend that their material meets the criteria of the canonical collections. Few of these, however, have tried to create a true literary apocalypse (or an apocalyptic narrative), after the fashion of classical Jewish or Christian literary apocalypses, since that would require them to ignore the traditional criteria of *ḥadīth* criticism. One cannot write an apocalyptic narrative and break in at almost every point to conduct a discussion about the merits and demerits of every transmitter. This method would be inimical to the needs of the audience listening to the apocalypse, who would be (and must be) interested and involved in the exciting content of the story-line.

There were, however, several Muslim apocalyptic writers who broke this mold and tried to build an apocalyptic history or narrative. One of these is the Andalusian Qurʾānic commentator al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272–3), whose *Tadhkira fī aḥwāl al-mawtā wa-umūr al-ākhirā* has been long known and used as a mainstay of Muslim apocalyptic and eschatological thought. It is not surprising that al-Qurṭubī produced such a powerful volume. He lived after a series of decisive battles in 609/1212 leading to the fall of Muslim Spain some 250 years later, and the Mongol destruction of Baghdad (656/1258). These events seemed apocalyptic to

many Muslims. This fact seems to have caused al-Qurṭubī to deviate from the ordinary *ḥadīth* style favored by his predecessors. For example, al-Qurṭubī ignores the *isnāds* of the apocalyptic traditions he uses and groups them together in a narrative form. He also suppresses the numerous contradictory traditions found in the *ḥadīth* literature in order to create a coherent whole, and supplies traditions and interpretations that are uniquely relevant to his Andalusian audience. All of these elements have contributed to al-Qurṭubī's lasting popularity in the Muslim world; presumably the Andalusian elements would be cherished as part of the lament for this lost territory. Even today his *Tadhkira* is one of a select number of apocalyptic works that still have a reading public throughout the Middle East.³

Another popular writer, al-Sharīf Muḥammad b. al-Rasūl⁴ b. 'Abd al-Sayyid al-'Alawī al-Ḥusaynī al-Mūsawī al-Shahrazūrī al-Barzanjī al-Madanī (d. 1103/1691),⁵ however, has attracted less scholarly attention, despite the equally abiding popularity of his *al-Ishā'a li-ashrāṭ al-sā'a*. Al-Barzanjī stands even further outside the mainstream than does al-Qurṭubī and deserves to be analyzed within the context of the times in which he lived and wrote.

II. Al-Barzanjī and his *al-Ishā'a li-ashrāṭ al-sā'a*

Al-Barzanjī was a controversial figure. He was born in Barzanj, a small village outside of Shahrazūr (near the Caspian Sea) in 1040/1630.⁶ Probably due to the persecution of Sunnīs in the Ṣafawī Persian Empire at that time, he left the region, and went to the Ottoman city of Mārdīn; from there he wandered through Aleppo, Yemen, Damascus, Anatolia, Egypt, Baghdad and finally Medina where he settled down permanently. Although he published fairly extensively, including a commentary upon

³Other than al-Qurṭubī's *Tadhkira fī aḥwāl al-mawtā* and al-Barzanjī's *Ishā'a*, Ibn Kathīr's *al-Fitan wa-l-malāḥim* is the most popular apocalyptic volume I have seen in bookstores throughout the Arabic-speaking Middle East and West Africa. Ibn Kathīr, however, is entirely traditional.

⁴In order to avoid the problematic "al-Rasūl," many names have "'Abd" added.

⁵Al-Barzanjī, *al-Ishā'a fī ash-rāṭ al-sā'a* (Muwaffaq Fawzī al-Jabr, ed., Damascus: Dār al-Namīr, 1995), p. 284 (other editions: Cairo: al-Mashhad al-Ḥusaynī, n.d.; Cairo: Dār Qutayba, 1989; and Maḥmūd 'Umar al-Dumyāṭī, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2002). His death date is incorrectly given in C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (Emil Felber: Berlin, 1902), vol. 2, p. 403 as 1131/1719—but is given correctly as 1103/1691 on p. 443 (other books give his death date as 1113/1701).

⁶Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 382 (Barzanjī is said to have been 18 miles from Bardhā'a in what is today southern Azerbaijan).

the Qur'ānic exegesis of al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286 or 691/1292), which he called *Anhār al-salsabīl li-riyāḍ anwār al-tanzīl* and another work called *al-Ḍāwī 'alā ṣubḥ fāṭihat al-Bayḍāwī*, most of his works, aside from the *Ishā'a*, remain in manuscript. Among his shorter works, the best known is a book on the Prophet Muḥammad's birthday, *Mawlid al-nabī*.⁷ His praises of the Prophet are popular in West Africa.⁸ Other works are commentaries on religious and grammatical subjects, and he also wrote a *qaṣīda* on the occasion of the (re)taking of Belgrade in 1101/1690.⁹ Polemical materials by al-Barzanjī will be discussed below.

But it is the *Ishā'a* that is by far the most important of his surviving works. For the scholar it represents a rare example of a classical apocalyptic treatise that can be related to known apocalyptic and messianic events. According to al-Barzanjī, he finished it on Wednesday, 11 Dhū al-Qa'da 1076 (April 20, 1666), between the two prayers.¹⁰ This treatise will be examined against the explosively apocalyptic atmosphere of the time and in the framework of the polemics between Sunnīs and Shī'īs which occupied so much of his writings.

The *Ishā'a* is an apocalyptic history and, unlike many other classical apocalyptic documents, seeks to prove that the balance of Muslim history can be interpreted in terms of apocalypse, the coming redemption by the Mahdī and the horrors of the end of the world. It is divided into three basic sections: the historical events of early Islam (divided into several sections discussed below) up to the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258, the Lesser Signs of the Hour (mostly moral), and the Greater Signs of the Hour. In this latter category, al-Barzanjī lists the standard signs: the appearance of the Mahdī, the great apocalyptic wars (*al-malāḥim*), the appearance of the Dajjāl (the Antichrist of the Muslim tradition), the descent of Jesus, the appearance of Gog and Magog, the destruction of the Ka'ba, the sunrise in the west, the smoke, and the lifting of the Qur'ān from people's hearts (this is the order in which he presents the events). Of these signs all except for the appearance of the Mahdī are non-controversial within the context of Sunnī Islam and require little comment, although occasionally al-Barzanjī shows surprising ability to

⁷Published (unedited) Damascus: Maṭbū'āt maktabat Muḥammad al-Mahayānī, n.d.

⁸E.g., *Manzūmāt al-sayyid al-Barzanjī fī mawlid sayyid al-awwalīn wa-'l-ākhirīn* (Kano: Bola Print, n.d.); *Nuzhat al-nāẓirīn fī masjīd sayyid al-awwalīn wa-'l-ākhirīn* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.).

⁹They are listed in Brockelmann, *GAL S* (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1938) vol. 2, pp. 529–30.

¹⁰Al-Barzanjī says on p. 2 that he wrote the book under the inspiration of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's treatise *Sharḥ al-ṣudūr bi-sharḥ ḥāl al-mawtā fī 'l-qubūr*. However, this is odd, since the latter volume deals with the dead (and is not quoted in the *Ishā'a*), while his book is clearly apocalyptic.

reinterpret key issues. It is al-Barzanjī's placing of apocalypse within the context of history and his interpretation of historical events and their meaning that make him remarkable.

In the first section of the *Ishā'a*, al-Barzanjī starts with the political events that are usually considered to have been part of the Lesser Signs of the Hour. These include the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, the assassinations of the two caliphs 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, and the Battles of the Camel (36/656), Ṣiffin (36–7/657), and Nahrawān (38/658). But then there is the first discordant note: 'Alī's assassination is not considered to be one of the signs, even though al-Barzanjī continues on smoothly noting that the murders of al-Ḥasan ('Alī's elder son) and al-Ḥusayn (at Karbalā' in 60/680) are signs. This point will be discussed further below. Continuing onwards, the Battle of the Ḥarra (64/683), the destruction of Medina, the death of 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr, the destruction of the Ka'ba (by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī in 73/692) and the execution of Zayd b. 'Alī (in 122/740) are all considered signs. With the coming of the 'Abbāsī dynasty, the execution of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (145/762), the appearance of the Fāṭimī dynasty (296/909), the appearance of the Qarmatians (260s/870s), the appearance of the Turks and the Mongols are all considered signs.

This section of the *Ishā'a* then takes a different turn by interpreting historical trends instead of individual events. Al-Barzanjī lists nineteen categories and events of the Lesser Signs of the Hour. These include the fire from the Ḥijāz that is said to have illuminated the necks of the camels in Buṣrā (northern Jordan), the appearance of the Shī'a (*rawāfiḍ*), the appearance of deceivers (*dajjālūn*), the conquest of Jerusalem and al-Madā'in, the destruction of the Arabs, the plethora of wealth, the moving of mountains from their places, the three occurrences of *khasf* (swallowing up by the earth), the multiple earthquakes, the metamorphosis (*maskh*) and bombardment by meteorites (*qadhf*), the red wind, drought, the attacks upon the *hajj* and the theft of the Black Stone (by the Ismā'īlī Qarmatians), hitting of people with meteorite stones from the heavens, the appearance of comets, the prevalence of death, the pillaging of Mecca, and the tribulations that occurred between the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ṣaḥāba*).

Al-Barzanjī culls the history books to find specific examples for each one of these categories. This is remarkable for a Muslim apocalyptic writer. Usually the method preferred by al-Barzanjī's predecessors was only to cite the relevant *ḥadīths* and to leave the interpretation to the reader. Al-Barzanjī, however, overwhelms the reader with numerous historical examples in most of his categories. With the exception of the comet of 1076/1665, however, none of the examples he lists are of a

personal nature. In his second section, al-Barzanjī takes his reader to the moral apocalypse, and adduces the social critique that is so common in this type of literature.¹¹ While for the most part this material is too general to be interesting, it is significant that al-Barzanjī identifies a number of these moral failings with the Shī'a.¹² This is part of the overall anti-Shī'i tone of his book which will be discussed below.

In general, the style of the *Ishā'a* is a mixture of narrative history and *ḥadīth*. There is an unusual number of poetry selections cited within the book¹³ and not very many Qur'ānic verses. Even his Qur'ānic verses, however, are different from those usually cited by Muslim apocalyptic writers.

It is convenient to read the *Ishā'a* together with *Yawmiyyāt Ṣan'ā'*, the local history of Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsim (Ibn al-Qāsim) (d. 1100/1689), who wrote between the years 1046–99/1636–1687 focusing on the Yemen.¹⁴ Ibn al-Qāsim gives us a detailed account of the events during the thirty years preceding the composition of al-Barzanjī's book, and though he never wrote an apocalyptic book himself, it is clear that he believed that the world was about to end in the near future.¹⁵ For this reason he never fails to note the natural disasters of the time, which included abnormal weather patterns, plagues of locust and other events,¹⁶ he usually interprets them in an apocalyptic or ominous manner. Paul Alexander, the scholar of Byzantine apocalypses and apocalyptic histories, notes the conjunction between apocalyptists and historians during the early Islamic period.¹⁷ Understanding the events of the time as the contemporaries would have comprehended them requires an examination of these events.

¹¹See my *Studies in Muslim apocalyptic*, chapter 5.

¹²E.g., *Ishā'a*, pp. 115, 132.

¹³E.g., *ibid.*, pp. 23, 44–5, 55, 61, 65, 74–5, 77, 91, 95, 98, 102, 106, 117, 168–9, 219.

¹⁴Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsim, *Yawmiyyāt Ṣan'ā'* (Abū Ḍabī: Cultural Foundation, 1996).

¹⁵This is my conclusion on the basis of the number of times in which Ibn al-Qāsim adduces apocalyptic content or visions (e.g., pp. 84–5, 132–3, 357, 366, 390).

¹⁶Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁷Paul Alexander, "Medieval apocalypses as historical sources," *The American Historical Review* 73 (1968): 997–1018, at p. 998.

III. The apocalyptic atmosphere of the 1070s/1660s in the Muslim world

When examining an apocalyptic moment in Muslim history, it is always difficult to identify the exact time at which the sensation of a looming apocalypse begins to emerge among the general population. A historian is frequently bound to ask himself how would people living in a certain period interpret events occurring during their lifetime. As we read the history books and try to come to some conclusions about the apocalyptic moment of the late 1070s/1660s, the question is to what extent would people have been aware of events deemed by historians important enough to be included in their works? This is a complex question that concerns issues of historical memory and the methods in which historians chose to shape their material; these methods do not enable us to comprehend why people reacted to a given set of circumstances in a hysterical (or apocalyptic) manner.

In view of these considerations, the apocalyptic stage for the period in which al-Barzanjī wrote his *Ishāʿa* had been set by 1000/1591–2, in which the Muslim world passed the important moment of its first millennium. For many Muslim apocalyptic writers and historians, the Prophet Muḥammad was sent during the final millennium of a world that was destined to last for some 7000 years. The thousand year mark fits in well with the Muslim perception of history as progressive revelation, and with the conception of God as a merciful and compassionate being who gave His creatures abundant time in which to repent and convert to Islam. A millennium is mentioned in Qurʾān 22:47 as only one day in the sight of the Lord; traditionally this was seen as a hint that the Muslim community would last for this period. A frequently quoted tradition states that “if there were but one day left in the world, God would lengthen that day until He sent a man from my family to fill the world with justice and righteousness as it has been filled with iniquity and injustice.”¹⁸

However, as with so many other issues, the great Egyptian polymath Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) provided a way for the Muslim community to proceed beyond this date. His *Kashf mujāwazat hādhihi al-umma al-alf*, written in response to a Muslim who believed that the end of times would come around 1000 AH, envisaged the possibility that the world would last until 1500 AH (approximately 2076 CE).¹⁹ It is apparent, however, that despite al-Suyūṭī’s calculations a number of Muslim

¹⁸ Abū Daʿūd, *Sunan* (Beirut: Dār Jīl, 1988), vol. 4, p. 104 (no. 4282).

¹⁹ Al-Suyūṭī, *Kashf mujāwazat hādhihi al-umma al-alf* in his *al-Ḥawāʾi li-l-fatāwā* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol. 2, pp. 86–92.

groups did believe that the end of the world would take place during the following century. Prophecies were circulating in the name of the Persian sage Hurmuzdāfrīd that the Arabs would rule for a period of 1060 years.²⁰ This means that the end of times would occur around 1060/1650, though most of the preceding millennium can hardly be described as “the kingdom of the Arabs.”

Mass apocalyptic movements are usually sparked by a conjunction between ancient prophecies (freely manipulated) and actual cataclysmic events. These can be social turmoil, destructive wars, cosmic signs (such as appearance of comets or other signs in the heavens) or natural signs such as swallowing up by the earth (*khasf*), plagues, volcanic explosions. All of these events are known from classical Muslim sources as *ashrāt al-sāʿa* (the Portents of the Hour), mentioned in Qurʾān 47:18. The simultaneous appearance of a sufficient number of these events can foment an apocalyptic movement.

Of all these signs, the celestial ones are the most difficult to disregard.²¹ The appearance of comets and meteorites was problematic within the context of medieval astronomy, and led many to believe that they conveyed some significant message from God concerning the state of the world. In 1063/1652–3, a few years before al-Barzanjī wrote the *Ishāʿa*, the Yemeni chronicler Ibn al-Qāsim wrote:

A star with a dark coloration (*dhū ḥumma*) appeared in the east. It was not lengthy, and had only the size of a span. It remained in place for a few days and then disappeared. In its wake another great star fell from the direction of the west to the direction of the east after the night prayers; it had a terrifying sound like the sound of strong thunder. It fell through the air to wherever God wanted it to fall.²²

Immediately in the wake of these stars’ ominous appearance, a leaflet appeared in Ṣanʿāʾ which purported to be from the keeper of the noble chamber (in Medina). This man said that he heard in his dream hortatory messages asking him to warn the Muslim public about sins being committed and blameworthy innovations introduced since the time of the Prophet Muḥammad. There was also information about the impending Day of Judgment. Unfortunately, at that particular point in the narrative, Ibn al-Qāsim decided to be coy and not tell us exactly what the

²⁰Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 418–9; trans. Franz Rosenthal, *The Muqaddima: an introduction to history* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 215–16.

²¹Lunar eclipses are recorded in Ibn al-Qāsim’s *Yawmiyyāt Ṣanʿāʾ* for 1072/1661–62 (p. 116); 1074/1663–64 (p. 124); 1075/1664–65 (p. 127); 1076/1665–66 (p. 138); a solar eclipse occurred in 1075/1664–65 (p. 129).

²²Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

man said. But it is clear that this was an apocalypse circulated at the time.²³

A short time later more celestial signs were seen. In 1070/1659–60 Ibn al-Qāsim wrote:

During the last part of this month [Shawwāl/June], two giant stars fell in the countryside of Shar‘ab in the lower Yemen, in a place called al-Khushub,²⁴ and they burned everyone who was there. It was said that they heard that sound all the way to the countryside of ‘Utuma.²⁵ Some of its people were out in their fields, outside the village and were physically unharmed; but some of them suffered from hearing difficulties and became deaf—we ask God for safety and protection²⁶! It was said that they [the meteorites] burned some of the insects and locust with the fire. The falling of the two stars was in the late morning .”²⁷

These events were undoubtedly terrifying for the local population, although the second may not have been of any apocalyptic significance.

While meteorites are spectacular and noteworthy to the historian, comets are much more spectacular and stay in the heavens for a longer time.²⁸ Just prior to the apocalyptic moment of 1076/1665–6, in which Shabbetai Zvi appeared there were multiple appearances of comets:

In the first part of Jumādā al-Ūlā [mid-November 1664], a star appeared in the east, having a lengthy light and a tail approximately 7 cubits²⁹ or more. It then moved to the middle of the sky, and bent there, taking the shape of a bow. Then it resumed a straight form. Perhaps it appeared first in the sign of Taurus, and then it moved west. It first appeared before dawn, and it preserved its shape until [the sun] appeared. Then it returned to the east before dawn, then faded away, and was no longer full. This was of the type with tails (*dhawāt al-adhnāb*), and [those] with a short tail (*nayāzik*) which God created. They are signs of hardships,

²³Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁴For this location, see al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifat Jazīrat al-‘Arab* (Cairo: al-Āfaq al-‘Arabiyya, 2000), pp. 219–21.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁶The text reads *nas’alu ‘llāh al-salāma wa-l-jumāla*. The last word makes no sense and may be corrupted from *al-ḥimāya*.

²⁷Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²⁸See my “A survey of Muslim material on comets and meteors,” *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 30 (1999): 131–60 at pp. 132–4.

²⁹See my “Survey” p. 132, for the difficulties of calculating this.

since they are ill-omened just as the learned have described in their books. This happens during rise in prices and famine—this is the custom which God enacts in most times; there is a prophetic tradition about this... It remained in place from the beginning of the aforementioned month until the end of Jumādā al-Ākhira [January 1665]; it was visible for close to two months.³⁰

This was the comet noted by al-Barzanjī in his *Ishāʿa*,³¹ though he does not expand upon its significance.³² Yet another dramatic sign, that of *khasf*, is mentioned by Ibn al-Qāsim following this comet. He says that there was a *khasf* in the land of the Persians,³³ and others are described for the following years (Ibn al-Qāsim also cites the apocalyptic traditions about *khasf*).³⁴ As if that was not enough, the previous notice of an ominous comet was followed almost immediately by another one:

During Ramaḍān of this year [1075/March 1665], the star which appeared during the month of Jumādā al-Ūlā [November 1664] returned; it had a long blazing light before it extending for seven cubits in the direction of its destination. It disappeared in haste.³⁵

Thus, by the early part of 1075/1665 people had witnessed the consecutive appearance of several comets, in addition to the lunar and solar eclipses, and possibly had heard about the earth swallowing people up in distant lands. The fact that apocalyptic movements appeared following these reports should not be a surprise.

³⁰ Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 129; this is probably C/1664 W1 dated by Gary Kronk, *Cometography: a catalog of comets. Volume 1: ancient–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 350–6 between Nov. 17, 1664–March 20, 1665. For other sightings, see Ibn al-Wakīl, *Tuḥfat al-aḥbāb bi-man malaka Miṣr min al-mulūk wa-l-nuwwāb* (Madīnat Naṣr: al-Āfāq al-ʿArabiyya, 1999), p. 143.

³¹ Al-Barzanjī, *Ishāʿa*, p. 92.

³² He does, however, include an interesting parenthetical remark (p. 92), where he describes a book that reached the Ottomans in 1077/1667 with a dramatic picture of a monster that had two black tails, four horns, the head of a bull, black eyes, four limbs, a beard and breasts like those of a woman. It was said that a monster appeared in the land of the Franks together with the comet. The monster killed 32,000 people, and there were failed attempts to kill it with mangonels while the comet was in the sky. It was killed only after the disappearance of the comet.

³³ Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

³⁴ Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

³⁵ Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 132; either this was the end of C/1664 W1 (from note 30 above) or else C/1665 F1 dated from March 27–April 20, 1665 (Kronk, *Cometography*, pp. 357–60).

IV. Mahdīs and messiahs

The most interesting aspect of al-Barzanjī's writing of the *Ishā'a* is the fact that it happens at almost the same time as the Jewish messianic interlude of Shabbetai Zvi. This mystical messiah, as recounted by Gershom Scholem, proclaimed himself as a result of a vision in Gaza at the end of May 1665.³⁶ Shabbetai Zvi's movement spread rapidly throughout the Jewish world, through Palestine, and preceded him all the way to Constantinople, where he was imprisoned in April 1666. Eventually Shabbetai Zvi converted to Islam, and led a number of Jews into apostasy with him.

Important though the Shabbetai Zvi movement is in Judaism, it is equally important not to divorce its appearance from the overall context of apocalyptic speculation that was taking place at the time among Muslims in Arabia and possibly in other places. Almost immediately following the comet of January 1665, Ibn al-Qāsim's history notes the appearance of a Mahdī figure:

During Rajab 1075 [February 1665], a man appeared in the Jabal Juba', which is situated in the waterfalls(?) of Ḥufāsh country,³⁷ who summoned the people and preached to them. The place [where he stayed] was not known. He entered a thicket (*hayja*)³⁸ and hid there. At times he used to come out and preach to people from towns and villages who approached him during the years (of his stay). He had followers who maintained relations with him and met him on certain days. Sometimes he used to say that he was the *mahdī* (expected) to emerge at the end of days, and sometimes he described himself as a preacher, commanding (good) and forbidding the sinful actions.³⁹

Notice of his actions reached the governor of al-Muḥawīt (in the Yemen) and a letter was composed to refute his claims (whether messianic or not). This man, at least according to the above account, seems to parallel the apocalyptic paradigm of a solitary figure who, while living outside of civilization proclaims the end of the world and remonstrates with sinful people. In the *ḥadīth* collection of al-Bukhārī, for example, it is said that when the Prophet Muḥammad was asked who was the best of people, he

³⁶Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: the mystical Messiah* (trans. Zvi Werblowsky, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 219–21.

³⁷Al-Hamdānī, *op. cit.*, pp. 124, 222, 237–9.

³⁸For *hayja* in this sense, see al-Iryānī, Muṭahhar 'Alī, *al-Mu'jam al-Yamanī fī al-lughā wa-'l-turāth* (Damascus, 1996), p. 954.

³⁹Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–30.

answered: "A believer who fights in the path of God with his soul and his wealth" (*mu'min yujāhidu fī sabīl Allāh bi-nafsihi wa-mālihi*) and then "a believer in one of the [mountain] paths who fears God and relieves the people from his wickedness" (*mu'min fī shi'bin min al-shi'ab yattaqī 'llāha wa-yada'u al-nāsa min sharrihi*).⁴⁰ Ibn al-Qāsim obviously did not accept this man's claims as legitimate, and stated outright that this particular time is not the End of Time, and that in any case the Mahdī has to hail from Mecca. Unfortunately, Ibn al-Qāsim is the only source for this Mahdī's appearance.

While all these occurrences, present as they were in the minds of people, are important for setting the stage for the apocalyptic moment, they are all merely preludes to another messiah who appeared among the Kurds during this time. Although there are no attestations of celestial visions in either the Ottoman or the Persian historical literature, a comet seen in the Yemen (and documented in other places in the world) would have presumably been visible in Kurdistan and perhaps helped to trigger this messianic appearance:

It was submitted to the Imperial Court [in Constantinople] by the former *beylerbeyi* of Mosul, Pahlavān 'Alī Pasha son of Ḥajjī Pīr, that a certain *shaykh* and descendant of the Prophet among the 'ulamā' of the Kurds in the province of 'Ammadiya named 'Abdallāh, due to excessive affection, had claimed 'My son Mehmet (Muḥammad) is the Mahdī,' and gathered a group of Kurds around him. The more this group increased, the more probable became the possibility that they might cause dissension and disorder. The aforementioned 'Alī Pasha, together with the governor of 'Ammadiya, after having secured a *fatwā*, marched against them and after a heavy slaughter defeated the aforementioned Kurds. Sayyid 'Abdallāh, who was responsible for this society, escaped and was captured by 'Alī Pasha, while his son was apprehended in a cave by the Wālī of Diyarbakr, Wazir Shaytan Ibrāhīm Pasha.⁴¹

This apocalyptic movement is clearly much more serious than the one documented in the Yemen. It appears to the north of Medina (where al-Barzanjī was living) in the region of the Ottoman Empire bordering the Shī'ī Ṣafawī Empire (as a matter of fact, the Ṣafawīs had controlled the region until 950/1534 and again between 1033–48/1623–38). More

⁴⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 264 (no. 2786).

⁴¹ Translation is from John Alden Williams, *Themes of Islamic civilization* (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), p. 232, the source is Silāḥdār Aga, *Ta'rīkh* (Istanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1928), vol. 1, pp. 434–35.

worrisome for the Ottomans was the fact that such a messianic proclamation closely paralleled that of the early Şafawīs themselves. Since the latter dynasty had begun as a messianic movement, and then had been able to take over the whole of Iran, there was always the danger that messianic speculation of this type could grow among the usually disaffected Turkish and Kurdish tribes of eastern Anatolia and northern Iraq.

In addition to these possible messianic or antinomian groups, there are indications of other disturbances in these years: in Egypt there are records of lawless, antinomian groups that seemed to be attacking the social order without an obvious leader.⁴² Al-Barzanjī is aware of the numerous failed messianic movements that occurred in the past. He lists Ibn Tūmart, the Mahdī of the Muwahḥidūn dynasty of Morocco (567–609/1171–1212), an unnamed man from India (to whom we will return later), the Kurdish messianic movement cited above, and tells of his personal experiences with it and the ludicrous nature of the claims made by this Mahdī figure.⁴³ From these comments it is clear that al-Barzanjī himself is not sympathetic to any messianic movements. He also has difficulties with the identification of the Dajjāl.

V. Causes and effects: messianic ebbs and flows

In his *Ishāʿa*, al-Barzanjī devotes considerable attention to the Dajjāl.⁴⁴ This discussion was not one of merely academic importance in the immediate wake of the Shabbetai Zvi messianic interlude. Throughout the Jewish world there were repercussions to the acceptance of Shabbetai Zvi as the messiah. A number of communities were divided, and some followed Shabbetai Zvi by embracing Islam (eventually creating the crypto-Jewish sect of the Dönmeḥ).⁴⁵ In several places there were strong reactions against the Jewish messianic expectations. Since part of the Muslim apocalyptic tradition is the idea that the messiah of the Jews is actually the Dajjāl, it follows that proclamation of a messiah must be a sign of the end of the world for Muslims. The figure of the Dajjāl is so loathsome, and the tribulations he brings are so serious (and murderous) that it is not surprising that rumors about his appearance

⁴²Ibn al-Wakīl, *Tuḥfat al-aḥbāb*, p. 144.

⁴³Al-Barzanjī, *Ishāʿa*, p. 187.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 188–219.

⁴⁵On the Dönmeḥ, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), s.v. “Doenmeḥ (Gershom Scholem); and Abdurrahman Küçük, *Dönmeḥler tarihi* (Ankara: Ulus, 2001).

among the Jews had disastrous consequences for the Jewish community, even though the sources do not mention Shabbetai Zvi as the Dajjāl.

Most of those consequences were borne by the Jewish community of Yemen. This ancient community was to be found in a number of small towns and cities throughout the Yemeni highlands, where it had always been protected by the Muslim rulers. However, as the messianic fervor of the Shabbetai Zvi movement spread through the community, a number of Muslims came to believe that the Dajjāl had been born among the Jews. Actions and statements made by Jews indicated that they were about to seize power from the Muslims and perhaps persecute and even murder them (far-fetched though that might sound).⁴⁶ Al-Barzanjī discusses the Dajjāl, but does not emphasize his Jewishness as other Muslim apocalyptic writers do (he never specifically says that the Dajjāl is Jewish). Although he mentions the fact that the Dajjāl is said to be followed by 70,000 Jews from Iṣfahān, he notes that Turks are also followers of the Dajjāl.⁴⁷

It seems from the accounts of Ibn Nāṣir al-Zaydī and Ibn al-Qāsim that the Jewish community of Yemen supported Shabbetai Zvi.⁴⁸ Van Koningsveld, Sadan and al-Samarrai identify several waves of messianic speculation that peaked about eight months after al-Barzanjī wrote his *Ishā'a* (December 1666–January 1667). This was followed by a general pillaging of the Jews, recorded by Ibn al-Qāsim (approximately end of January and beginning of February 1667). He says: "The crier cried out in the market-place 'The Imam has declared them to be forfeit' and so the people rushed to this pillage. . . ."⁴⁹ After this, the rumor spread that one of the Jewish children was the Dajjāl, and so a number of them were gathered and murdered. Ibn al-Qāsim applauds the quickness of the mob in preempting the appearance of the Dajjāl.⁵⁰

But later on, during the month of May 1667, another messianic figure named Sulaymān al-Aqṭa' appeared, and instigated a second wave of messianic expectation among the Jews.⁵¹ The reaction toward this messianic interlude was far more violent. Al-Aqṭa' was eventually executed, but the exaggerated messianic claims of the Jews led to their

⁴⁶This material has been published by P.S. van Koningsveld, J. Sadan and Q. al-Samarrai, *Yemenite authorities and Jewish messianism: Aḥmad ibn Nāṣir al-Zaydī's account of the Sabbathian movement in seventeenth century Yemen and its aftermath* (Leiden: Leiden University Faculty of Theology, 1990), pp. 15–6.

⁴⁷Al-Barzanjī, *Ishā'a*, p. 191.

⁴⁸Koningsveld, Sadan and al-Samarrai, *Yemenite authorities*, pp. 77f.; Ibn al-Qāsim, *Yawmiyyāt San'ā'* pp. 145–7.

⁴⁹Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 145. Cf. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, pp. 651–657.

⁵⁰Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁵¹Van Koningsveld, Sadan and al-Samarrai, *op. cit.*, pp. 61–76.

eventual expulsion from parts of Yemen in 1088/1677 and 1090/1679.⁵² Apparently there was strong feeling on the part of the local Yemenites that the Jews needed to be exiled in order to purify the land. For this purpose their synagogue (*kanīsa*) was destroyed, even though the ruler is said to have tried to prevent this.⁵³ Ibn al-Qāsim placed these actions within the context of his critique of the rulers, who he felt were too lax in their enforcement of the *sharīʿa*.⁵⁴ Being a devout Sunnī and an opposer of the Shīʿa, al-Barzanjī would have probably agreed.

VI. Apocalyptic polemics between Sunnīs and Shīʿīs

It is not surprising that al-Barzanjī is quite anti-Shīʿī. Given the fact that he himself was a refugee from the Iranian world, almost certainly because he was a Sunnī, the reasons why the *Ishāʿa* has a marked anti-Shīʿī leaning are quite clear. This bias must be seen within the context of the overall Sunnī-Shīʿī polemic which underlies the conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Ṣafawī Empire. However, it must also be remembered that the lines between the two empires were far from being clear-cut. There were substantial groups of Shīʿīs or groups sympathetic to the Shīʿa within the Ottoman Empire, and the conversion of Persia to Shīʿism was far from complete at this point. As a refugee who probably fled from this process of conversion, al-Barzanjī was quite sensitive to the major issues that divided Sunnīs and Shīʿīs.

The figure of ʿAlī is downplayed in the *Ishāʿa*. While his major battles—the Battle of the Camel, the Battle of Ṣiffin and the Battle of Nahrawān—are all mentioned as portents of the Hour, the actual assassination of ʿAlī (in contradistinction to those of his two caliphal predecessors) is passed over. And al-Barzanjī makes it clear to us that the supporters of Muʿāwiya (the Umayyad ruler of Syria), ʿAlī's opponent, were not fundamentally unjust. He says specifically that the followers of Muʿāwiya were good Muslims.⁵⁵ The appearance of Shīʿism overall is listed as one of the signs of the end of the world as well.⁵⁶

When al-Barzanjī deals with the subjects of al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn he makes an interesting change of emphasis. Instead of the assassination of the more important figure of ʿAlī, he concentrates upon that of his son al-Ḥasan. Since al-Ḥasan was hardly a major figure in early Islam this

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3; and Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, pp. 327, 342.

⁵³ Ibn al-Qāsim, *op. cit.*, pp. 353, 362–3, 367.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 331–3.

⁵⁵ Al-Barzanjī, *Ishāʿa*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–8, 115.

is rather puzzling at first. He also places the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn within a Sunnī context, and points out the injustice of ‘Ubaydullāh b. Ziyād (the governor of Iraq under whom al-Ḥusayn was killed) and the caliph Yazīd (61–64/680–3). But the focus upon al-Ḥasan, the elder of the Prophet Muḥammad’s two grandsons, is not accidental. Al-Barzanjī returns to the figure of al-Ḥasan in his section on the Mahdī, and proclaims that the sacrifice of al-Ḥasan, when he gave up the caliphate to Mu‘āwiya (after ‘Alī’s assassination) is one of the primary criteria for his descendants’ prominence in the messianic future. Whereas the Shī‘īs focus upon al-Ḥusayn as the ancestor of their Mahdī, al-Barzanjī nominates al-Ḥasan (and his descendants) for this position.⁵⁷ After all, he was the elder of the two grandsons, he stood for peace not war (and thus is better equipped to usher in a peaceful messianic age), and his descendants are more numerous than those of al-Ḥusayn.⁵⁸ Also, by al-Barzanjī’s time the descendants of al-Ḥasan were actually ruling Mecca, and would have been politically dominant in the Ḥijāz.

Immediately upon beginning the discussion of the figure of the Mahdī, al-Barzanjī dismisses the Shī‘ī claims concerning the Twelfth Imam.⁵⁹ He says: “These [Shī‘ites who believe in the occultation of the Twelfth Imam] have become a humiliation (‘*ār*) for humanity (*banī Ādam*) and a laughing-stock from which every intelligent person makes mockery.”⁶⁰ Al-Barzanjī goes even further with regard to the Dajjāl, since he specifies that his followers will be Shī‘īs (*rawāfiḍ*) for which he brings the argument “that everyone who has a *mithqāl* of love in his heart for the killers of ‘Uthmān will follow the Dajjāl.”⁶¹ Since all Shī‘īs, according to al-Barzanjī, love the killers of ‘Uthmān, they will be the followers of the Dajjāl. It is interesting to note the fact that al-Barzanjī is an example of an apocalyptic writer who downplays the anti-Jewish aspects of the Dajjāl saga and goes out of his way to insert anti-Shī‘ī polemics into this narrative that are not always present in other versions.

In addition to these anti-Shī‘ī polemics, al-Barzanjī is well-known for his attacks on Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624), the Ṣūfī Naqshbandī reformer active approximately fifty years previously in India.⁶² There are no anti-Sirhindī comments in the *Ishā‘a* (which preceded his

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁵⁸ By this he apparently means that because al-Ḥusayn’s descendant, the Twelfth Imam, went into occultation in 261/874 and there are no obvious descendants from that branch of the family, al-Ḥasan’s family has more possible candidates for the position of Mahdī.

⁵⁹ Al-Barzanjī, *Ishā‘a*, pp. 139–40.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁶² See Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī* (McGill: Montreal and London, 1971), pp. 97–99, 119–20.

anti-Sirhindī pamphlet *Qadh al-zand* by almost 16 years), but there is the intriguing description of the Mahdawiyya, the followers of the 15th century Mahdī in India.⁶³ Even in this period al-Barzanjī was interested in Indian events enough to comment on them in his works.

VII. Conclusions: apocalyptic aftermath

Apocalyptic explosions in Muslim history are a regular occurrence. With the series of events that led up to the explosion of 1076–7/1665–6 a number of Muslim norms were set aside. Protected peoples, such as the Jews, found that during a period of heightened messianic expectations they could become the targets of pogroms. When the Jews expected their Messiah, in this case Shabbetai Zvi, the Muslims feared the appearance of the Dajjāl. For this reason riots and the mass slaughter of Jewish children in the Yemen occurred in the immediate wake of the Shabbetian messianic interlude.

What was the role of al-Barzanjī in all of this? Although he wrote the *Ishāʿa* shortly after the apocalyptic interlude of Shabbetai Zvi (but prior to that of the Jews of Yemen), and was obviously influenced by it in general (if apparently not by its Jewish aspect), what was the relationship of his book to the events of his time? This is a difficult question. With regard to each apocalyptic writer we must ask whether this writer was trying to encourage the appearance of further apocalyptic or messianic movements or was he trying to dispel or dampen the enthusiasm that was already in the air? Was he prescriptive or descriptive? The evidence from al-Barzanjī's book suggests that he was not in favor of any apocalyptic movement that was active during his time. Al-Barzanjī's primary target was Shīʿī messianic beliefs, and perhaps he feared that the atmosphere of the 1070s/1660s would encourage Shīʿī sympathies developing among Sunnīs (or those with a weak allegiance) because of the coherent Shīʿī apocalyptic and messianic scenario. The most probable interpretation of the *Ishāʿa* is that al-Barzanjī wanted to demonstrate that Sunnīs had an equally powerful scenario, and that according to it the end of the world was not imminent.

Although al-Barzanjī was bold in his interpretations of the classical Muslim apocalyptic tradition, he was not so bold as to truly confront the problematic questions that the material raises. For example, he cites the prominent traditions about the conquest of Constantinople being

⁶³Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Muslim revivalist movements in Northern India* (New Delhi: Manshiram Manoharlal, 1965), chapter 2.

one of the Signs of the Hour (although he does not list them with the other signs noted prominently throughout his book), but he does not resolve the question of how these traditions should be interpreted when Constantinople had been Muslim for well over 200 years.⁶⁴ There is the further question of the date of the Dajjāl's appearance. According to the apocalyptic traditions, his appearance is closely related to the Muslim conquest of Constantinople, usually said to occur seven years later. Although al-Barzanjī knows this tradition, he does not seem to need to resolve the obvious historical problem. Since Constantinople fell to the Muslims in 1453, the appearance of the Dajjāl should have followed that event immediately.

It is also odd that al-Barzanjī does not take the opportunity to demolish the earlier Muslim identification of the Turks with the apocalyptic peoples of Gog and Magog. This would not have been difficult, since many Muslim apocalyptists after the 13th century held to the idea that Gog and Magog were the Mongols. While al-Barzanjī might be making a mild case that Gog and Magog were to be associated with the Persians (he lists a tradition that they are from the region of Daylam for example)⁶⁵ the Turks are also listed as having affinities with these dreaded peoples. Thus, al-Barzanjī does not take every opportunity to clear up questions within the apocalyptic material that might have been difficult for a Sunnī Muslim during the middle Ottoman period.

⁶⁴ Al-Barzanjī, *Ishāʿa*, p. 160f. promises to explain this (presumably along the lines of the idea that Constantinople was now Rome, pp. 162–3, 184–5) but he never fully fleshes out the idea.

⁶⁵ Al-Barzanjī, *Ishāʿa*, p. 229.